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NEWS NARRATIVES AND CIVIC COMMUNICATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: THE CROSS-BORDER CASE OF POINT ROBERTS

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Derek Moscato is a research fellow with the Border Policy Research Institute and an associate professor in the Department of Journalism at Western Washington University. His research examines international and cross-border media systems alongside environmental communication, persuasion, and public diplomacy. Moscato's more recent borderlands research projects include an overview of Cascadia's cross-border media ecosystem as well as public communication related to the future of the Skagit River watershed. Moscato has worked professionally on both sides of the Washington/British Columbia border and previous to the pandemic was a regular visitor to Point Roberts. This Border Brief is part of his larger BPRI research focused on cross-border media flows in the Cascadia region, and an extension of 2020's "Reporting on Cascadia: The Evolution of a Cross-Border Media Ecosystem."

INTRODUCTION

News media, as an outgrowth of civic culture and communication, can shift existing views of political, economic and ecological life, especially in cross-border contexts. In a bi-national jurisdiction such as Cascadia, which sprawls across the British Columbia/Washington border, news reporters help align prominent political and economic issues with concurrent national or international narratives (see "Reporting on Cascadia: The Evolution of a Cross-Border Media Ecosystem"¹). This is especially true when major political events with cross-border ramifications serve as a catalyst for extensive media coverage.

Amid the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and 2021, the challenges facing cross-border communities along the Canada-US boundary have been particularly acute. While dozens of such jurisdictions exist along this border, including metropolitan regions, a number of smaller communities face unique circumstances given their challenging geographic situation and subsequent cross-border realities. They include Hyder, Alaska; Minnesota's Northwest Angle; and Campobello Island, New Brunswick.

Faced with historically unprecedented restrictions of the international border crossing, residents of these communities and many others have been confronted with unique economic, political, and quality-of-life stresses. This includes the separation of family members, the downturn of economic activity associated with the halt of cross-border tourism and visitation, and the navigation of complex regulation for essential cross-border travel including quarantine rules. The unprecedented nature of such cross-border circumstances—including their oddity or counter-intuitive nature—has inevitably attracted extensive media coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the Canada-US border has been closed to non-essential traffic. This media reporting provides insights into the emergent communication ecosystem of stakeholders in cross-border communities, and offers insights into how affected regions might leverage such attention to facilitate efficient policymaking, governance, and public opinion cultivation.



POINT ROBERTS

Point Roberts, Washington—an isolated community in the northwest quadrant of Washington state—provides a striking case in point. The community of roughly 1,000 full-time residents has received an inordinate amount of local, regional, and international media attention since the border restrictions during March of 2020. This ongoing media coverage provides important insights into both the ecology of news media in cross-border contexts, but also how different levels of journalism (community, national, international, and digital) interact to cultivate larger media narratives and facilitate dialogue and policy impact during the pandemic emergency.

As a five-square-mile US exclave that is reachable by land travel through British Columbia, Point Roberts’ case is a unique one. Since 2020, residents have been effectively stranded from the US mainland and unable to travel except for essential purposes because of COVID-19 border restrictions (though an emergency walk-on ferry

service now provides twice-weekly travel to the US mainland). The plight of residents has received attention from numerous broadcasters, including CNN, CTV, and CBC, but also leading newspapers. A September 1 New York Times feature article described a “paradise...beginning to feel more like Alcatraz.” The Toronto Star published an article about the possibility of Canada buying the community from the United States.

This coverage provides a reminder that the Canada–US border often goes unnoticed by the national media, until there is a major disruption event like 2020’s COVID-19 border restrictions. Numerous communities—from large metropolitan centers to small cities and towns—have been impacted by the Canada–US border restrictions of 2020 and 2021. The case of Point Roberts presents an important case study, as its unique geography has exacerbated the implications of a restricted border.

Three factors in particular have made Point Roberts’ situation difficult. Firstly, many of Point Roberts’ full-time residents rely on crossing the border into Canada—particularly to the adjacent British Columbia communities of Tsawwassen and Ladner—to access educational, recreational, or work opportunities. Others travel further afield to Richmond, Surrey, and downtown Vancouver for other amenities.

Secondly, a number of Point Roberts’ social and government institutions are part of Whatcom County, Washington, which means that residents must cross the border twice—first into Canada, and then south again into the mainland US—to access various services or opportunities. Residents also make the roundtrip to Bellingham or Blaine for medical services, for schooling, and for shopping.

And thirdly, due to Point Roberts’ close proximity to the metropolitan Vancouver, BC region, a majority of land and homeowners in the community are Canadian, owing to the location’s recreational amenities and resort economy, and more affordable prices (the average house in Point Roberts is valued at roughly \$365,000 (USD), which is far less than the over \$1million (USD) average cost for a typical detached family home in adjacent Greater Vancouver). Most of the Canadian-owned homes are used as part-time residences and vacation dwellings, particularly during the summer months. The influx of Canadians between June and September sustains a tourism economy that includes restaurants, bed and breakfasts, a marina, and a golf course. Many Canadians also make short day-trips to the community for groceries, fuel, or to pick up packages at one of several parcel services. These services in turn sustain local employment for full-time residents.

POINT ROBERTS PRESS AND THE ALL POINT BULLETIN

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the community’s local newspaper, the All Point Bulletin, has served a major role in facilitating media dialogue between isolated residents of Point Roberts and critical decision-makers on both sides of the U.S-Canada border. Published by Point Roberts Press, the monthly newspaper publishes weekly e-news and a monthly print edition covering the local community. The publication’s cross-border marketing and distribution expertise (it distributes 4,500 copies to the neighboring British Columbia communities of Tsawwassen and Ladner) and extensive availability on Point Roberts itself has helped to foster a wider community dialogue about decision-

making pertinent to the community’s future during a precarious time.

During the pandemic, the newspaper has covered a range of critical topics related to the community’s unique and sometimes difficult circumstances. These include the provision of COVID-19 vaccinations within the community; emergency transportation measures such as the implementation of a special passenger ferry connecting Point Roberts to Bellingham, Washington on the mainland; the diversification of the tourism economy amid border restriction struggles for local business; and revised logistics related to the Canada–US border restrictions for non-essential travel.

THE ROLE OF CROSS-BORDER MEDIA

Media in Canada have been a major source for reporting about the situation in Point Roberts, and continue to be the journalistic catalyst for conversations about the exclave’s plight, particularly in terms of its connection to the Vancouver Metropolitan region. According to data collected from the Nexis U database, the number of media stories about Point Roberts in conjunction with COVID-19—including newspaper stories, blog articles, press releases, and industry reports—had hovered over the 1,000 mark. Over 600 of these stories were from international sources, the majority of which were Canadian. By comparison, about 400 stories and articles were from US sources.

In terms of influence and distribution, among all articles major newspaper and broadcasting stories had the most impact. For example, at the one-year anniversary of the restrictions of the Canada–US border for non-essential travel (March 21, 2021) the Point Roberts situation had been reported in 35 different articles in the Vancouver Sun and a further 36 in the Post Media Network. Other major Canadian media players included the Toronto Star/thestar.com (23 stories), The Vancouver Province (8 stories), and the Canadian Press (5 stories). As a point of comparison, the Seattle Times had published less than 10 stories during this timeframe. The audience for these stories would range between several hundred thousand to several million readers. This underscores the importance of not only metropolitan media services but also national and global news outlets.

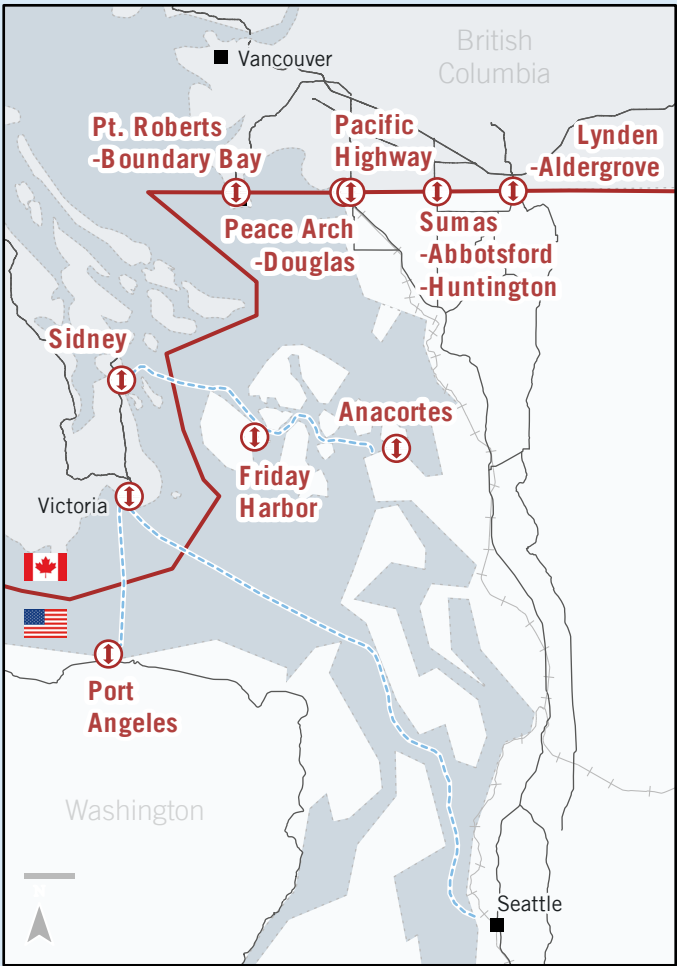


Figure 1. Land and marine border crossings in Cascadia.

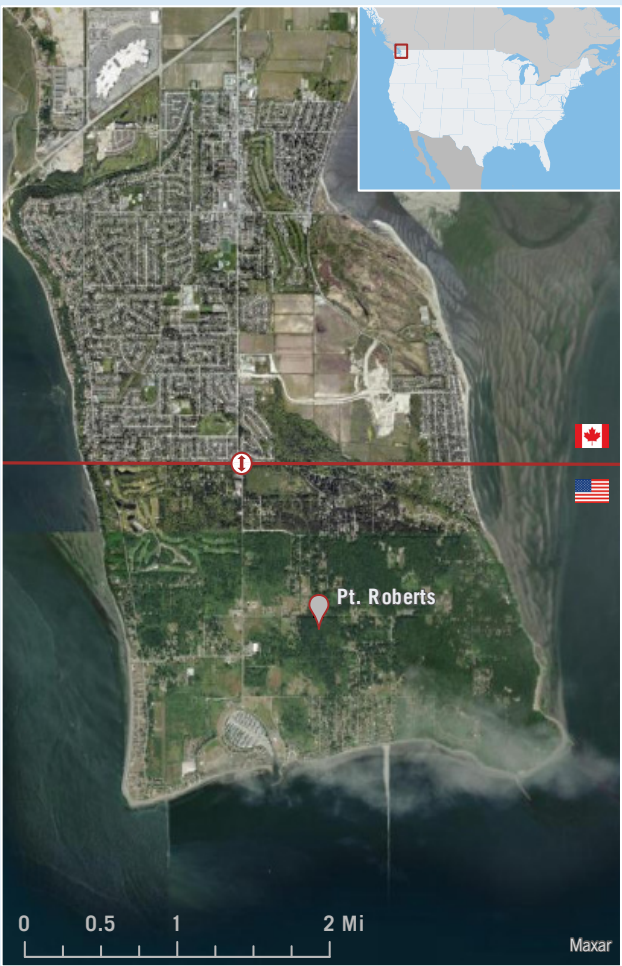


Figure 2. Aerial photo of Point Roberts and the Canada-US border.

NEWS OUTLET	DATE	STORY TITLE
PBS News-hour	March 23, 2021	Separated by only a few miles, geographic quirk forces families apart during pandemic
CBS News	March 7, 2021	Cut off from the rest of America, a small town endures lockdown
Global News (Canada)	November 1, 2020	'We're suffering and they don't care': No border exemption for Point Roberts
Toronto Star	October 18, 2020	Should Canada buy this American community? Cut off by COVID-19, some in Point Roberts say it's time for a change
CNN	October 15, 2020	The parts of America cut off by the pandemic
CBC	September 27, 2020	The birth of a ghost town: Point Roberts has lost 80% of its business, hundreds of its residents
Reuters	September 6, 2020	US-Canada towns marooned by border closure brace for winter trapped in isolation
New York Times	September 1, 2020	'I am stuck until that border opens': Marooned in paradise
Washington Post	August 25, 2020	US-Canada border closure hurts Washington state town
High Country News	August 4, 2020	A Washington town isolated from the US is now cut off from Canada, too
New York Post	April 16, 2020	This is the 'safest place' from coronavirus in America
Fox News	April 16, 2020	This place in Washington state is seen as one of the 'safest' from coronavirus
The Guardian	April 16, 2020	'The safest place': how one isolated US town is keeping coronavirus at bay
Toronto Star	March 20, 2020	Amid the coronavirus pandemic, a Canada-locked American community braces to be cut off from the world
Globe and Mail	March 20, 2020	The unique threat of illness in Point Roberts, Washington

Figure 3. Feature stories about Point Roberts during the COVID-19 border restrictions from national media outlets.

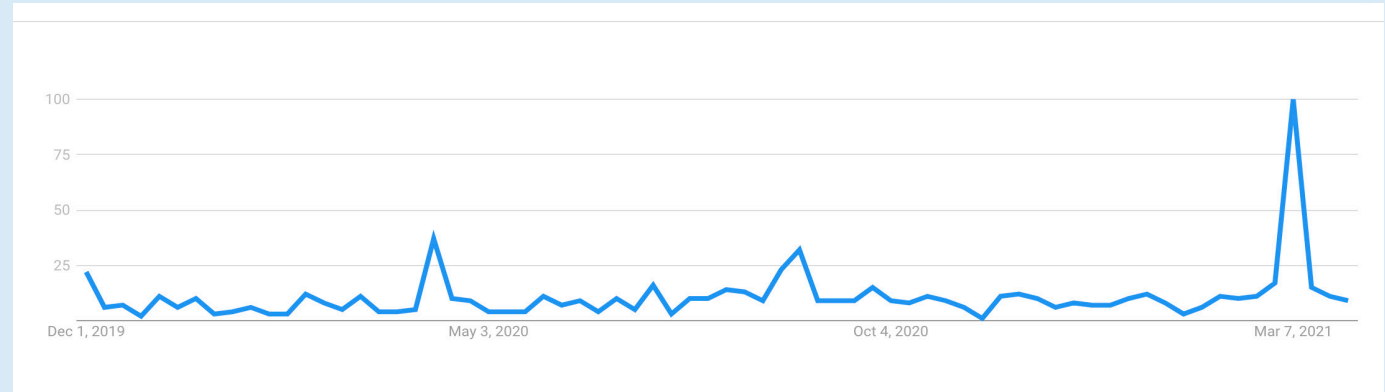


Figure 4. Interest in Point Roberts, Washington as determined by Google searches between December 2019 and April 2021. Web-based searches for the community reached an all-time high on March 7, 2021, when the community's plight was profiled by CBS Sunday Morning. Earlier spikes of interest occurred on April 16, 2020, when the community was the focus of major news articles by the New York Post, The Guardian, The Daily Mail, and Fox News; and in late summer of 2020, when the town was the subject of feature stories by the Washington Post (August 25) and the New York Times (September 2). Via Google Trends (trends.google.com).

THE IMPACT OF GLOBAL AND NATIONAL MEDIA

Throughout the pandemic and border restrictions, Point Roberts has attracted an inordinate amount of global and national media attention from the likes of the New York Times, the Washington Post, and CNN. A first wave of stories in spring of 2020 highlighted the relationship between Point Roberts’ unique geographic situation and its ability to remain safe from the coronavirus. However, a second emergent narrative about Point Roberts described the dire circumstances for local residents and business owners who were cut off from the rest of their own county and indeed from any other jurisdiction, including Canada but also the state of Washington.

A third wave of stories during the latter part of 2020 and into 2021 focused on the mid- to long-term impacts of this isolation, including the ramifications felt by individuals and families, but also the need for policymakers on both sides of the border to address the community’s struggles with more aggressive and timely solutions. These stories have aligned with government lobbying and public opinion efforts, including a February 22, 2021 letter about the community and larger cross-border difficulties to President Joseph Biden from Washington state members of the United States House of Representatives, as well as similar letters from the state’s US senators and Washington state governor Jay Inslee.

Some of these national/international articles were subsequently circulated in local or hyperlocal social media forums such as Facebook and Nextdoor, where they generated critique and commentary from local residents. This flow of communication amid media events highlights a unique interplay between international/national media, local newspapers and radio, and hyperlocal social media forums. In some cases, this mediation could exacerbate existing tensions or misunderstandings related to border restrictions, binational issues, or COVID19 travel regulations.

Furthermore, the unregulated nature of social media has rendered it vulnerable to rumors, speculation, and even falsehoods. For example, according to the All Point Bulletin, a posting on the community's Nextdoor site on January 12 about transients arriving in Point Roberts via the emergency ferry

service and squatting in vacant cottages unleashed “a flood of comments” over 12 days. “Fake news travels fast” noted the newspaper in dispelling the social media generated falsehoods.

Yet social media services like Facebook, Twitter, and Nextdoor have allowed citizens to discuss their representation in larger media narratives, to share policy documents that are usually the purview of government officials, and to discuss opportunities for civic engagement and citizen involvement.

Community media, meanwhile, is shown here to serve a key role in facilitating journalistically responsible dialogue between a multitude of cross-border stakeholders, including local citizens, national news media, and regional policymakers and experts.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

For cross-border communities facing the direct impacts of COVID-19 border restrictions and complexities, both national and regional media coverage has served multiple purposes even as it takes on sometimes contradictory roles. The case of Point Roberts shows that stories being told nationally and internationally have reached not only mass audiences but also influential policymakers and government leaders. Such coverage from the “outside” also helps prioritize cross-border stories in regional and metropolitan news contexts while emphasizing the urgent nature of citizens’ concerns. This is especially important for those cross-border communities with particularly acute circumstances owing to geography, including Point Roberts but also Hyder, Alaska; Minnesota’s Northwest Angle; and Campobello Island, New Brunswick.

Such stories certainly feature many of the news values held by media gatekeepers in terms of what stories get told and how: impact, timeliness, prominence, proximity, oddity, conflict, and relevance.² Yet for impacted communities, this media coverage fulfills more pressing and localized goals. For cross-border jurisdictions, media stories as well as op-eds have helped to fill bureaucratic and governance gaps.

Additionally, new communication norms established during this period create a potential template for future civic engagement. News stories are immersed in a larger ecosystem of advocates, citizen groups, business leaders, academics, government officials committed to dialogue and civic engagement. This process takes on characteristics of public diplomacy

as it also involves consulates, think tanks, and other foreign exchange enterprises. As a result, it is expected that post-pandemic media institutionally should be better positioned to inform their publics.

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, no small community in North America has arguably received as much media attention and journalistic focus as Point Roberts. During the Canada–US border restrictions that have limited the movement of local residents, national and international media stories about the jurisdiction have oscillated between narratives of paradise and dystopia. Along with the ongoing theme of isolation, media have focused on the community's especially low COVID-19 rate but also its sometimes-confusing convergence of governing jurisdictions and regional authorities.

Despite these larger narratives that serve audiences with a fleeting, curious interest in the community, these stories have had hyperlocal and longer-lasting impacts.

Reporting about Point Roberts has provided information, utility, advocacy, calls to action, and rhetorical narratives. To this end, residents of cross-border communities along the Canada–US border continue to draw from a combination of national, metropolitan, and local media, as well as social media forums and public policy documents, to forge a successful path forward in navigating this historic social crisis.

ENDNOTES

1. Moscato, D. (2020). Reporting on Cascadia: The Evolution of a Cross-Border Media Ecosystem. Border Policy Research Institute Publications. 123. https://cedar.wvu.edu/bpri_publications/123.
2. Walsh, J. (2017, September 15). These 7 news values can help you make smarter content choices. Atlantic 57. <https://medium.com/atlantic-57/these-7-news-values-can-help-you-makesmarter-content-choices-6b3cbc0bddf7>.

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